

The Wild Swans

Far, far away, in that country where the swallows fly from us for the winter, there lived a king. He had eleven sons and one daughter, Eliza.

The eleven prince-brothers already went to school; on each of their chests shone a star, and at their sides clattered a sabre; they wrote on golden slates with diamond styluses and could read excellently, whether from a book or by heart—it was all the same. One could immediately hear that real princes were reading! Their sister Eliza sat on a little bench made of mirror glass and looked at a picture book for which half a kingdom had been paid.

Yes, the children lived well, but not for long!

Their father, the king of that land, married a wicked queen who took a dislike to the poor children. They had to experience this on the very first day: there was merriment in the palace, and the children started a game of visiting guests, but instead of various pastries and baked apples, which they always received in abundance, the stepmother gave them a teacup full of sand and said they could pretend it was a treat.

A week later she sent sister Eliza to be raised in the countryside by some peasants, and after a little more time had passed, she managed to say so much to the king about the poor princes that he no longer wanted even to see them.

"Fly away, good health to you, in all four directions!" said the wicked queen. "Fly as great birds without voices and provide for yourselves!"

But she could not do them as much harm as she wished—they turned into eleven beautiful wild swans, flew out of the palace windows with a cry, and soared over parks and forests.

It was early morning when they flew past the hut where their sister Eliza still slept soundly. They began to fly over the roof, stretched out their flexible necks, and flapped their wings, but no one heard or saw them; thus they had to fly away empty-handed. High, high they rose up to the very clouds and flew into a great dark forest that stretched all the way to the sea.

Poor little Eliza stood in the peasant hut and played with a green leaf—she had no other toys; she poked a hole in the leaf, looked through it at the sun, and it seemed to her that she saw the clear eyes of her brothers; when the warm rays of the sun glided over her cheek, she remembered their tender kisses.

Days followed days, one like another. Did the wind sway the rose bushes growing near the house and whisper to the roses: "Is there anyone more beautiful than you?"—the roses shook their heads and said: "Eliza is more beautiful." Did some old woman sit on Sunday at the door of her little house, reading a psalter, while the wind turned the pages, saying to the book: "Is there anyone more devout than you?" the book answered: "Eliza is more devout!" Both the roses and the psalter spoke the absolute truth.

But then Eliza turned fifteen, and she was sent home. Seeing how pretty she was, the queen became angry and hated her stepdaughter. She would gladly have turned her into a wild swan, but this could not be done immediately, because the king wanted to see his daughter.

And so early in the morning the queen went to a marble bathhouse, entirely adorned with wonderful carpets and soft cushions, took three toads, kissed each one, and said to the first:

"Sit on Eliza's head when she enters the bath; let her become as dull and lazy as you! And you sit on her forehead!" she said to the second. "Let Eliza become as ugly as you, so her father will not recognize her! And you lie upon her heart!" whispered the queen to the third toad. "Let her become evil-tempered and suffer from it!"

Then she lowered the toads into the clear water, and the water immediately turned completely green. Calling Eliza, the queen undressed her and ordered her to enter the water. Eliza obeyed, and one toad sat on the crown of her head, another on her forehead, and the third on her chest; but Eliza did not even notice this, and as soon as she stepped out of the water, three red poppies floated upon the surface. Had the toads not been poisoned by the witch's kiss, they would have turned, after lying on Eliza's head and heart, into red roses; the girl was so devout and innocent that the sorcery could not affect her in any way.

Seeing this, the wicked queen rubbed Eliza with walnut juice, so that she became quite brown, smeared her little face with a stinking ointment, and tangled her wonderful hair. Now it was impossible to recognize pretty Eliza. Even her father was frightened and said that this was not his daughter. No one recognized her except the chained dog and the swallows, but who would listen to poor creatures!

Eliza wept and thought of her banished brothers, secretly left the palace, and wandered all day across fields and marshes, making her way toward the forest. Eliza herself did not quite know where she ought to go, but she longed so much for her brothers, who had also been driven from their native home, that she resolved to seek them everywhere until she found them.

She had not been long in the forest before night fell, and Eliza lost her way completely; then she lay down on soft moss, recited a prayer before sleep, and rested her head on a tree stump. Silence reigned in the forest, the air was so warm, hundreds of fireflies flickered in the grass like little green lights, and when Eliza brushed her hand against some bush, they showered down into the grass like a rain of stars.

All night long Eliza dreamed of her brothers: they were all children again, playing together, writing with styluses on golden slates, and looking at the most wonderful picture book that cost half a kingdom. But they did not write dashes and zeros on the slates as they used to before—no, they described everything they had seen and experienced. All the pictures in the book were alive: birds sang, and people stepped down from the pages and talked with Eliza and her brothers; but as soon as she wished to turn a page, they jumped back in, otherwise the pictures would have become confused.

When Eliza woke up, the sun was already high; she could not even see it properly through the dense foliage of the trees, but individual rays pierced between the branches and ran like golden bunnies across the grass; a wonderful scent rose from the greenery, and the little birds almost settled on Eliza's shoulders. Not far away the babbling of a spring could be heard; it turned out that several large streams flowed there, emptying into a pond with a wonderfully sandy bottom. The pond was surrounded by a living hedge, but in one place wild deer had broken a wide passage for themselves, and Eliza could descend right to the water. The water in the pond was clean and transparent; had the wind not stirred the branches of trees and bushes, one might have thought that both trees and bushes were painted on the bottom, so clearly were they reflected in the mirror of the waters.

Seeing her own face in the water, Eliza became quite frightened, so black and ugly it was; and so she scooped up a handful of water, rubbed her eyes and forehead, and again her white, tender skin sparkled. Then Eliza undressed completely and entered the cool water. Such a pretty princess would be hard to find anywhere in the wide world!

Having dressed and braided her long hair, she went to the babbling spring, drank water directly from her cupped hands, and then walked further into the forest, not knowing where. She thought of her brothers and hoped that God would not abandon her: for it was He who commanded wild forest apples to grow to feed the hungry; He also pointed out to her one of those apple trees, whose branches bent under the weight of fruit. Having satisfied her hunger, Eliza propped up the branches with little sticks and plunged into the very thicket of the forest. There

such silence prevailed that Eliza heard her own footsteps, heard the rustling of every dry leaf that came under her feet. Not a single bird flew into this wilderness, not a single sunbeam slipped through the solid thicket of branches. Tall trunks stood in dense rows, like log walls; never before had Eliza felt so lonely.

At night it became even darker; not a single firefly glowed in the moss. Sadness weighed upon Eliza as she lay on the grass, and suddenly it seemed to her that the branches above parted, and the Lord God Himself looked down upon her with kind eyes; little angels peeped out from behind His head and from under His arms.

Waking in the morning, she herself did not know whether that had been a dream or reality. Setting off further, Eliza met an old woman with a basket of berries; the old woman gave the girl a handful of berries, and Eliza asked her whether eleven princes had passed through here, along the forest.

"No," said the old woman, "but yesterday I saw here on the river eleven swans wearing golden crowns."

And the old woman led Eliza to a cliff beneath which flowed a river. Trees grew on both banks, stretching out their

to each other their long, branches thickly covered with leaves. Those trees that failed to weave their branches with the branches of their brothers on the opposite shore stretched themselves out over the water so far that their roots tore out of the ground, and yet they achieved their goal.

Eliza said farewell to the old woman and walked toward the mouth of the river flowing into the open sea.

And now before the young girl opened a wonderful boundless sea, but across all its expanse not a single sail was visible, nor was there a single little boat in which she could set forth on her long journey. Eliza looked at the countless boulders thrown onto the shore by the sea—the water had polished them until they became perfectly smooth and round. All other objects cast up by the sea: glass, iron, and stones—also bore traces of this polishing, and yet the water was softer than Eliza's tender hands, and the girl thought: "The waves roll ceaselessly one after another and finally polish even the hardest objects. So I too shall labor ceaselessly! Thank you for the lesson, bright swift waves! My heart tells me that someday you will carry me to my dear brothers!"

On the dry seaweed thrown up by the sea lay eleven white swan feathers; Eliza gathered them and tied them into a bundle; drops still glistened on the feathers—dew or tears, who knows? The shore was desolate, but Eliza did not feel it: the sea represented eternal variety; in a few hours one could see more here

than in a whole year anywhere on the shores of fresh inland lakes. If a great black cloud advanced upon the sky and the wind strengthened, the sea seemed to say: "I too can turn black!"—it began to churn, to surge, and to cover itself with white lambs. But if the clouds were pinkish and the wind had died down, the sea resembled a rose petal; sometimes it turned green, sometimes white; but whatever stillness hung in the air and however calm the sea itself might be, near the shore a slight motion was always noticeable—the water rose gently, like the breast of a sleeping child.

When the sun was close to setting, Eliza saw a row of wild swans flying toward the shore, wearing golden crowns; there were eleven swans in all, and they flew one after another, stretched out into a long white ribbon. Eliza climbed up and hid behind a bush. The swans descended not far from her and flapped their great white wings.

At the very moment the sun disappeared beneath the water, the plumage fell from the swans, and on the ground stood eleven handsome princes, Eliza's brothers! Eliza cried out loudly; she recognized them at once, despite the fact that they had changed greatly; her heart told her that it was they! She threw herself into their arms, called them all by name, and how overjoyed they were to see and recognize their little sister, who had grown so much and become so beautiful. Eliza and her brothers laughed and wept and soon learned from one another how wickedly their stepmother had treated them.

"We, brothers," said the eldest, "fly as wild swans all day, from sunrise until sunset; but when the sun goes down, we again assume human form. Therefore, by the time of sunset we must always have solid ground beneath our feet: should we turn into people while flying among the clouds, we would immediately fall from such a terrifying height. We do not live here; far, far beyond the sea lies a country just as wonderful as this one, but the road thither is long; we must fly across the entire sea, and along the way there is not a single island where we could spend the night. Only in the very middle of the sea rises a small solitary rock, upon which we can somehow rest, huddled closely together. If the sea rages, spray flies even over our heads, but we thank God even for such a refuge: without it, we would never manage to visit our beloved homeland—and now, for this flight, we must choose the two longest days of the year. Only once a year are we permitted to fly to our homeland; we may remain here eleven days and fly over this great forest, from which we can see the palace where we were born and where our father lives, and the church steeple where our mother rests. Here even the bushes and trees seem kin to us; here across the plains wild horses still run, which we saw in the days of our childhood, and the charcoal burners still sing those songs to which we danced

as children. This is our homeland; our hearts draw us hither, and here we have found you, dear, beloved sister! Two more days we may stay here, and then we must fly away across the sea, into a foreign land! But how can we take you with us? We have neither ship nor boat!"

"How can I free you from the spell?" asked their sister.

Thus they talked almost the entire night and fell asleep only for a few hours.

Eliza awoke to the noise of swan wings. Her brothers had again become birds and were flying in great circles in the air, and then disappeared entirely from view. Only the youngest of the brothers remained with Eliza; the swan laid his head upon her knees, and she stroked and sorted through his feathers. They spent the whole day together, and toward evening the others returned, and when the sun set, all again assumed human form.

"Tomorrow we must fly away from here and cannot return before next year, but we will not leave you here!" said the youngest brother. "Will you have the courage to fly away with us? My arms are strong enough to carry you through the forest—surely all of us together can carry you on our wings across the sea?"

"Yes, take me with you!" said Eliza.

All night they worked weaving a net from flexible osier and reeds; the net turned out large and sturdy; into it they placed Eliza. Transforming at sunrise into swans, the brothers seized the net in their beaks and soared upward with their beloved sister, who slept soundly, toward the clouds. Sunbeams shone directly upon her face, so one of the swans flew above her head, shielding her from the sun with his broad wings.

They were already far from land when Eliza awoke, and it seemed to her that she was seeing a dream while awake, so strange was it to fly through the air. Beside her lay a branch with wonderful ripe berries and a bundle of tasty roots; the youngest brother had gathered these and placed them beside her, and she smiled gratefully at him—for in her sleep she had guessed that it was he who had flown above her and protected her from the sun with his wings.

High, high they flew, so that the first ship they saw upon the sea appeared to them like a seagull floating on the water. Behind them in the sky stood a great cloud—a veritable mountain!—and upon it Eliza saw moving giant shadows of the eleven swans and her own. What a picture that was! Such things she had never seen before! But as the sun rose higher and the cloud remained farther and farther behind, the aerial shadows gradually vanished.

All day the swans flew like an arrow shot from a bow, yet nevertheless slower than usual; for now they were carrying their sister. Day began to incline toward evening; bad weather arose; Eliza watched with fear as the sun sank, and still the solitary sea rock was nowhere to be seen. It seemed to her that the swans were beating their wings with unusual effort. Ah, it was she who was to blame that they could not fly faster! If the sun set, they would become people, fall into the sea, and drown! And she prayed to God with all her heart, but the rock still did not appear. A black cloud approached; strong gusts of wind foretold a storm; the clouds gathered into a solid, menacing leaden wave rolling across the sky; lightning flashed after lightning.

With one edge the sun almost touched the water; Eliza's heart trembled; suddenly the swans plunged downward with incredible speed, and the girl thought they were all falling; but no, they continued flying. The sun had halfway disappeared beneath the water, and only then did Eliza see below her a rock, no larger than a seal raising its head from the water. The sun faded quickly; now it seemed only a small shining star; but then the swans stepped foot upon solid ground, and the sun went out like the last spark of burning paper. Eliza saw around her her brothers, standing hand in hand; all of them barely fit upon the tiny rock. The sea raged against it and drenched them with a whole rain of spray; the sky

blazed with lightning, and thunder roiled every minute, yet the sister and brothers held hands and sang a psalm that poured comfort and courage into their hearts.

At dawn the storm subsided; again it grew clear and quiet; with the sunrise the swans flew onward with Eliza. The sea still heaved, and from above they saw white foam drifting across the dark-green water like countless flocks of swans.

When the sun rose higher, Eliza beheld before her what seemed a mountainous country floating in the air, with masses of glittering ice upon the cliffs; between the cliffs towered an enormous castle, entwined with daring aerial galleries of columns; beneath it swayed palm forests and luxurious flowers as large as millwheels. Eliza asked whether this was the land toward which they were flying, but the swans shook their heads: she saw before her the wondrous, ever-changing cloud-castle of Fata Morgana; thither they dared not bring a single human soul. Eliza fixed her gaze once more upon the castle, and behold, the mountains, forests, and castle drew together and formed twenty identical majestic churches with bell towers and pointed windows. It even seemed to her that she heard the sound of an organ, but it was only the sea roaring. Now the churches were quite close, yet suddenly they turned into an entire flotilla of ships; Eliza looked more closely and saw that it was merely sea mist rising above the water. Yes, before her eyes were ever-shifting airy shapes and pictures! But at last the true land appeared, the land

toward which they were flying. There rose wonderful mountains, cedar forests, cities, and castles.

Long before sunset Eliza sat upon a rock before a great cave, as though draped with embroidered green carpets—so densely had it grown over with tender-green creeping plants.

"Let us see what dreams come to you here tonight!" said the youngest of the brothers, pointing out to his sister her sleeping place.

"Oh, if only I might dream how to free you from the spell!" she said, and this thought would not leave her mind.

Eliza began to pray earnestly to God and continued her prayer even in sleep. And then it seemed to her that she flew high, high through the air to the castle of Fata Morgana, and that the fairy herself came forth to meet her, so radiant and beautiful, yet at the same time astonishingly like the old woman who had given Eliza berries in the forest and told her of the swans in golden crowns.

"Your brothers can be saved," she said. "But will you have enough courage and steadfastness? Water is softer than your tender hands, and yet it polishes stones; but it feels no pain such as your fingers will feel; water has no heart that would waste away from fear and torment, as yours will. Do you see this nettle in my hands? Such nettles grow here beside the cave, and only these, and those that grow in churchyards, can serve you; take note of them! You must gather these nettles, though your hands will be covered with blisters from burns; then crush them with your feet, spin from the resulting fiber long threads, and weave from them eleven mail-shirts with long sleeves, and cast them upon the swans; then the enchantment will vanish. But remember: from the moment you begin your work until you finish it, even if it should last whole years, you must not speak a single word. The first word that escapes your lips will pierce your brothers' hearts like a dagger. Their life and death will be in your hands! Remember all this!"

And the fairy touched her hand with the stinging nettle; Eliza felt pain as from a burn and awoke. It was already bright day, and beside her lay a bundle of nettles, exactly like the one she had just seen in her dream. Then she fell upon her knees, thanked God, and went out of the cave to set to work at once.

With her tender hands she tore the wicked, stinging nettles, and her hands were covered with large blisters, yet she bore the pain gladly: if only she could save her dear brothers! Then she crushed the nettles with her bare feet and began to spin the green fiber.

At sunset the brothers returned and were greatly frightened to see that she had become mute. They thought this some new sorcery of their wicked stepmother, but, looking upon her hands, they understood that she had fallen silent for their salvation. The youngest brother wept; his tears fell upon her hands, and wherever a teardrop fell, the stinging blisters vanished and the pain subsided.

Eliza spent the night at her work; rest would not enter her thoughts; she thought only of how soon she might free her dear brothers. The whole next day, while the swans flew about, she remained all alone, yet never had time flown so swiftly for her. One mail-shirt was finished, and the maiden took up the next.

Suddenly in the mountains sounded the notes of hunting horns; Eliza was frightened; the sounds drew nearer, then came the baying of hounds. The girl hid herself in the cave, bound all the nettles she had gathered into a bundle, and sat upon it.

That very instant a great dog leaped from the bushes, then another, and a third; they barked loudly and ran to and fro. Within a few minutes all the hunters assembled at the cave; the most handsome among them was the king of that land; he approached Eliza—never had he beheld such beauty!

"How did you come here, lovely child?" he asked, but Eliza only shook her head; for she dared not speak: upon her silence depended the life and salvation of her brothers. She hid her hands beneath her apron so that the king might not see how she suffered.

"Come with me!" he said. "You cannot remain here! If you are as kind as you are fair, I shall clothe you in silk and velvet, place a golden crown upon your head, and you shall dwell in my magnificent palace!" And he set her before him on the saddle; Eliza wept and wrung her hands, but the king said: "I desire only your happiness. Someday you yourself will thank me!"

And he carried her across the mountains, while the hunters galloped behind.

By evening there appeared the king's splendid capital, with churches and domes, and the king led Eliza into his palace, where in lofty marble chambers fountains murmured, and walls and ceilings were adorned with paintings. But Eliza looked at nothing; she wept and languished; indifferently she yielded herself to the attendants, who dressed her in royal garments, wove strands of pearls into her hair, and drew fine gloves over her burned fingers.

The rich ornaments suited her so well, she was so dazzlingly beautiful in them, that the entire court bowed before her, and the king proclaimed her his bride, though the archbishop shook his head, whispering to the king that the forest beauty must

surely be a witch, that she had bewitched all their eyes and enchanted the king's heart.

The king, however, would not listen to him; he gave a sign to the musicians, commanded the loveliest dancers to be summoned and costly dishes to be served, and himself led Eliza through fragrant gardens into magnificent chambers, while she remained as before sorrowful and sad. But then the king opened the door of a little room situated right beside her bedchamber. The room was hung all about with green carpets and resembled the forest cave where Eliza had been found; upon the floor lay a bundle of nettle fiber, and from the ceiling hung the mail-shirt woven by Eliza; all this, as a curiosity, one of the hunters had brought from the forest.

"Here you may recall your former dwelling!" said the king.

"Here too is your work; perhaps amidst all the splendor surrounding you, you will sometimes wish to divert yourself with memories of the past!"

Seeing the work so dear to her heart, Eliza smiled and blushed; she thought of her brothers' salvation and kissed the king's hand, and he pressed her to his heart and ordered the bells to be rung in honor of his wedding. The mute forest beauty became queen.

The archbishop continued to whisper evil words to the king, but they did not reach the king's heart, and the wedding took place. The archbishop himself had to place the crown upon the bride; in vexation he pressed the narrow golden circlet so tightly upon her brow that anyone else would have felt pain, but she paid it no heed: what was bodily pain to her when her heart wasted away from longing and pity for her dear brothers! Her lips remained pressed together; not a single word escaped them—she knew that upon her silence depended her brothers' lives—yet in her eyes shone

A burning love for the kind and handsome king, who did everything just to please her. With each day she grew more and more attached to him. Oh! If only she could trust him, tell him of her sufferings, but—alas!—she had to remain silent until she finished her work. At night she would quietly leave the royal bedchamber and go to her secret little room, resembling a cave, and there weave one shirt of mail after another; but when she had already begun the seventh, she ran out of all her fiber.

She knew she could find such nettles in the graveyard, but she had to gather them herself; what was she to do?

"Oh, what is bodily pain compared to the sorrow tearing at my heart!" thought Eliza. "I must make up my mind! The Lord will not forsake me!"

Her heart contracted with fear, as if she were going to commit some evil deed, when she crept through the garden on a moonlit night, then along long avenues and deserted streets to the graveyard. Upon the broad tombstones sat hideous witches; they had cast off their rags as if preparing to bathe, tore open fresh graves with their bony fingers, dragged out the bodies, and devoured them. Eliza had to pass by them, and they stared at her with their wicked eyes—but she said a prayer, gathered the nettles, and returned home.

Only one person was awake that night and saw her—the archbishop; now he was convinced he had been right to suspect the queen, and so she was a witch and had therefore managed to bewitch the king and all the people.

When the king came to him for confession, the archbishop told him what he had seen and what he suspected; evil words poured from his tongue, while the carved images of saints shook their heads, as if to say: "It is not true; Eliza is innocent!" But the archbishop interpreted this in his own way, saying that even the saints testified against her, shaking their heads in disapproval. Two large tears rolled down the king's cheeks; doubt and despair seized his heart. That night he only pretended to sleep; in reality, sleep fled from him. And thus he saw Eliza rise and slip out of the bedchamber; on the following nights the same thing happened; he followed her and saw how she disappeared into her secret little room.

The king's brow grew darker and darker; Eliza noticed it but did not understand the reason; her heart ached with fear and pity for her brothers; bitter tears, shining like diamonds, fell upon the royal purple, while people who saw her rich attire wished to be in the queen's place! But soon, very soon, her work would end; only one shirt remained. She begged him with looks and signs to leave; that night she absolutely had to finish her work, otherwise all her suffering, her tears, and her sleepless nights would have been in vain! The archbishop departed, hurling abusive words at her, but poor Eliza knew she was innocent and continued working.

To help her even a little, the mice scurrying across the floor began gathering scattered nettle stalks and bringing them to her feet, while the thrush sitting behind the barred window comforted her with its cheerful song.

At dawn, shortly before sunrise, Eliza's eleven brothers appeared at the palace gates and demanded to be admitted to the king. They were told this was quite impossible: the king was still asleep and no one dared disturb him. They continued begging, then began threatening; guards arrived, and finally the king himself came out to learn what the matter was. But at that moment the sun rose, and there were no brothers anymore—eleven wild swans soared above the palace.

The people flocked in masses outside the city to watch the witch being burned. A wretched nag drew the cart in which Eliza sat; a cloak of coarse sackcloth was thrown over her; her wonderful long hair hung loose upon her shoulders; there was not a drop of blood in her face; her lips moved softly, whispering prayers, while her fingers wove green yarn. Even on the way to the place of execution she did not release her unfinished work from her hands; ten shirts of mail lay completely finished at her feet, and she was weaving the eleventh. The crowd mocked her.

"Look at the witch! See how she mutters! Surely it's no prayer book in her hands—no, she keeps fussing with her sorcerous tricks! Let's tear them from her hands and rip them to shreds."

And they pressed around her, intending to snatch the work from her hands, when suddenly eleven white swans flew down, settled on the edges of the cart, and loudly flapped their mighty wings. The frightened crowd stepped back.

"This is a heavenly sign! She is innocent," many whispered, but dared not say it aloud.

The executioner seized Eliza by the hand, but she hastily threw the eleven shirts over the swans, and... before her stood eleven handsome princes, except that the youngest lacked one arm; instead, he had a swan's wing: Eliza had not managed to finish the last shirt, and one sleeve was missing.

"Now I can speak!" she said. "I am innocent!"

And the people, having witnessed all that occurred, bowed before her as before a saint, but she fell senseless into her brothers' arms—so greatly had unceasing strain, fear, and pain affected her.

"Yes, she is innocent!" said the eldest brother, and recounted everything exactly as it had happened; and while he spoke, a fragrance spread through the air, as from countless roses—each log in the pyre had taken root and sprouted, forming a tall, fragrant bush covered with red roses. At the very top of the bush gleamed, like a star, a dazzlingly white flower. The king plucked it, placed it upon Eliza's breast, and she regained consciousness to joy and happiness!

All the church bells began ringing of their own accord, birds flocked in whole flocks, and such a wedding procession proceeded to the palace as no king had ever seen before!